



## South Africa needs more PhDs

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There is an interesting and troubling debate that seems to be bubbling under in South Africa when it comes to a PhD (Doctorate of Philosophy). It would be good that the debate in question comes to the surface and we engage robustly with those involved instead of sensationalising the issue and leaving it to soundbites in social networks.

Sioux McKenna recently indicated that there is a process to check the quality of Doctorates in South Africa. Apparently, the National Research Foundation (NRF) and the Council on Higher Education (CHE) are sponsoring if not leading the said process. Incidentally, Brenda Wingfield explains the importance of a PhD on the same day that McKenna's article appeared in *The Conversation*. The NRF tweeted that the quality of PhDs would be assured by the CHE.

In 2000 *The Economist* wrote about the 'hopeless continent', referring to Africa. In 2012 it characterised Africa as a 'hopeful continent'. In 2010 it had written a sarcastic article about 'why doing a PhD is a waste of time'. *The Economist* said that "brilliant well-trained minds can go to waste when fashions change." It would seem ideas change too like fashion. In about a decade the continent that was seen as hopeless was suddenly viewed as rising. In South Africa we were told that the country should produce more PhDs and now we are told quality is being compromised as we work around the clock to try and meet a difficult target of producing 100 graduates per million people that was proposed by the government.

The logic that an increase in the number of those who attain a particular qualification compromises quality is flawed. The sensationalisation of the issue is also problematic. In this particular instance of PhD qualifications, the question to ask is why is there a perceived or real increase in the number of PhD graduates. A sober analysis should inform the decision whether to assure quality or not. If the analysis suggests that quality must be checked, a robust process should be followed.

All dissertations and theses are in the public domain, at least easily accessible by the NRF and the CHE. If any of these two institutions want to verify quality, a panel could be set up to take a sound sample from all theses that have recently passed. The NRF and CHE can also ask each university to send a list of all theses for a particular period of interest then decide which ones to read to check for quality or get the panel I have in mind to read all the theses.

All universities follow rigorous processes for enrolling and awarding a PhD qualification. It is possible that some universities do not follow the process properly. If so, a specific initiative to deal with that can be instituted than casting doubt over all PhD qualifications in the whole country. In the ten years as an academic I have been fortunate to supervise for many universities in the different fields of studies in the social sciences and also as an external examiner for different institutions.

The process to admit someone to a PhD study is cumbersome: it takes a minimum of six months to get the research proposal approved. Some universities have Higher Degrees Committees that oversee the process and others have an examination process and some use both.

Some universities are even more thorough. The research proposal is presented to a group of academics in a particular school or department and an external expert is present to comment on the proposal. For many universities Doctoral students immediately apply for ethical clearance after they pass the research proposal stage. The ethical clearance process is comprehensive: a student has to demonstrate to the relevant committee that he or she fully understands the research problem and she or he is very clear about the methodological approach, over and above clarifying pertinent research ethics for the study.

Once the thesis is completed at the satisfaction of the supervisor, a process to submit the thesis for examination ensues. External examiners get appointed and all relevant administration processes take place under the guidance of an Examination Committee. Then there are processes within Colleges or Faculties and Senate. The supervisor, by the way, writes all sorts of reports during the research and during examination processes. The supervisor also ensures that the student has met other requirements such as that a journal article based on the thesis research has been published.

Admitting a student to a Doctoral study can also require that a student first repeats research methodology modules so as to ensure that the student can pursue a Doctoral research degree. At times students are not admitted even if they meet requirements and a student can appeal which can take months before it is indicated whether a student can be allowed to do a PhD. Let me add that for some departments or schools a student presents each chapter of the thesis to a seminar where an expert on the topic is present and the expert would have read the chapter in advance.

I have quickly highlighted processes that I have encountered in the ten years of being an academic. I think many universities will provide variations of the indicated processes. I do not see the value of asking universities to explain what I just explained. The purported process to check quality of PhDs is envisaged to get universities to explain what I have just explained. Rather, theses themselves should be read to determine quality.

It is not surprising that more African students are completing PhDs. It is ironical that the NRF gives significant funding to ensure that there are more African PhDs but this very institution can tweet about the quality of PhDs. The NRF funding is over and above funding by the National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences.

Similarly, it is disingenuous for the CHE to claim that there could be a problem of quality in PhDs when the CHE is aware of all the processes I have sketched. It might be that these two institutions have been captured by elements that are against the progress that some among us are breaking backs to ensuring that we assist in efforts towards meeting the government target. We also believe in a PhD although some PhD graduates do disappoint.

It is a paradox that the question of quality is being raised when there are numerous research training and mentorship programmes that are aimed at ensuring that Doctoral students complete their studies. It might also be that the number of senior lectures has increased and there is more capacity to supervise PhDs. I also think there are increasingly more professors who guide Doctoral students better. It is also obvious that associate professors would work harder in producing more PhDs in order to qualify for full professorships. There also appears to be more Doctoral students that have the discipline and stamina to get through a PhD study.

There may be concerns about the quality in general in the South African higher education system. Those should indeed be addressed. There are debates about the value of a Doctoral qualification. That is possibly an important debate. There could be views about improvements that can be introduced. For instance, some think that as it is done in some universities in Europe, North America and some parts of Africa it would be a good idea that after completion a Doctoral student presents her or his thesis in a public forum. There could also be concerns about some supervisors. Those should be investigated and proper sanctions implemented.

I would have thought that the more fundamental issue is that we are not graduating enough PhDs and or not fast enough.